

WILBUR HOWARD DUNCAN  
1910–2005

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ABSTRACT

Wilbur Howard Duncan (1910–2005) is remembered as the Curator of the University of Georgia Herbarium (1938–1978), skilled field botanist, gifted teacher, field guide author, plant photographer, and friend.

RESUMEN

Wilbur Howard Duncan (1910–2005) será recordado como el curador del Herbario de la Universidad de Georgia (1938–1978), como un botánico de campo con talento, profesor dedicado, autor de guías de campo, fotógrafo naturalista y un gran amigo.

We are saddened to report the passing of Wilbur Howard Duncan (Figs. 1, 2), University of Georgia Professor Emeritus of Botany and retired Curator of the GA Herbarium. He died at his home attended by his family on 25 March 2005 in Athens, Georgia. He was over 94 years old (Anonymous 2005; Zomlefer & Giannasi 2005a, b, c, d).

Wilbur was born on 15 October 1910, in Buffalo, New York, attended Bloomington High School in Indiana, and received an A. B. (1932) and M.A. (Botany, 1933) from Indiana University. After earning a Ph.D. from Duke University under the forest ecologist Clarence F. Korstian in 1938, he began his distinguished forty-year teaching and research career at the University of Georgia, Department of Botany (now Department of Plant Biology). He was also curator of the GA Herbarium. His faculty position at the university was interrupted by four years of service as First Lieutenant and ultimately, Major, in the U. S. Public Health Service (1943–1946) as an entomologist in charge of mosquito control for Charleston, South Carolina (and other locales in the Southeast) during World War II (Powell 2005; Smith 2005).

Wilbur Duncan had an illustrious career spanning seven decades during which he generously shared his enthusiasm and expertise in botany with students, professionals, and amateurs alike. He was direct in imparting information in the classroom setting, but in the field he took on the role of gentle guide: he would ask questions to help students discover the answer, i.e., to “see” the plant for themselves and thereby better commit the information to memory.



FIG. 1. Wilbur Howard Duncan, circa 1990, attired with his trademark bowtie.

Students often had difficulties keeping up with Professor Duncan's long-legged strides in the field, but he always waited for them to catch up to examine an interesting plant. After his patient and inquisitive expository, he was off again with a crowd of students trailing far behind him!

He inspired several generations of students via over 20 popular hands-on field courses (UGA 1939, 1942, 1950a, b, 1962, 1971a, b, 1977a, b), including: Elementary Botany, Plant Ecology, Field Botany, Taxonomy of Seed Plants (also listed as Plant Taxonomy), Agrostology (also listed as Taxonomy of Grasses; Identification of Grasses; Taxonomy of Grasses, Sedges, and Rushes), Aquatic Plants, Identification of Flowering Plants, Identification of Trees and Shrubs (also under Trees and Shrubs; Taxonomy of Woody Plants), and Local Flora for Teachers. For many years he also taught a course in poisonous plant identifica-

tion required by the Veterinary School (M. Duncan, pers. comm.). Wilbur also supervised six Master's students and ten Ph.D. students, whose studies focused primarily on floristics of the southeast (e.g., Duncan & Pullen 1962; Pullen 1963; Jones 1964; Yates 1969; Yates & Duncan 1970; Gibbs Russell & Duncan 1972; Givens 1971; Faircloth 1971, 1975; Gunn 1974).

Wilbur was a mega-collector in the spirit of Cyrus G. Pringle and Alan H. Curtiss, collecting over 30,000 plant specimens in his lifetime (in multiple sets) that he deposited at GA and distributed to other herbaria throughout the southeastern United States (see Fig. 2). Through his efforts, the GA Herbarium grew from 16,000 to 135,000 specimens during his tenure there. Among these specimens is his first: a collection of *Trillium sessile* (Fig. 3). Wilbur's field work included photographing the plants, as well as making specimens of them. His photographs emphasized features needed for accurate identification—requiring, for example, illumination of the inside of a *Liriodendron tulipifera* L. flower (Duncan & Duncan 1988, p. 151) or the anthers of *Rhexia alifanus* Walter (Duncan & Duncan 1987, p. 106) via a series of homemade handheld reflectors (L. Duncan, pers. comm.). He even flicked droplets of water on floating *Nymphaea odorata* Willd. leaves (Duncan & Duncan 1999, p. 193) to provide proper size contrast.

According to his most recent resume on file in our department, Wilbur published 65 articles in scientific journals, mainly on the floristics of the Southeast (e.g., Duncan 1954a, 1964, 1966a, 1967, 1969, 1977, 1979a; Duncan et al. 1955, 1957), particularly of Georgia (e.g., Duncan 1948, 1950a, 1954b, 1955, 1957, 1960, 1962a, 1966b, 1971, 1979b, 1984; Duncan & Blake 1965; Duncan & Kartesz 1981). Besides floristics, his interests in these species ranged from nomenclature (e.g., Duncan 1950b), descriptions of new taxa (Duncan 1940, 1944, 1950c, 1977; Duncan et al. 1971), morphology (e.g., Duncan 1933, 1950d, 1959a; Duncan & Brown 1954), to natural history (e.g., Duncan 1959b, 1962b; Duncan & DeJong 1964). His discovery of a new rare oak species, *Quercus oglethorpensis* W.H. Duncan (Oglethorpe oak; Duncan 1940, 1950e; Bishop & Duncan 1941), in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, was the first new oak found east of the Mississippi in 90 years (summary in Coder 2003).

The University of Georgia Press published three plant identification books authored by Wilbur during his tenure as faculty member: *Guide to Georgia Trees* (Duncan 1941), *Woody Vines of the Southeastern United States* (Duncan 1975), and *Wildflowers of the Southeastern United States* (Duncan & Foote 1975). Wilbur's greatest claim to fame, however, are his popular field guides produced after his "retirement": *The Smithsonian Guide to Seaside Plants of the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts* (Duncan & Duncan 1987), *Trees of the Southeastern United States* (Duncan & Duncan 1988), and *Wildflowers of the Eastern United States* (Duncan & Duncan 1999). All three are still in print; the latter, covering over 1,000 species, is currently a best-seller for the University of Georgia Press. At the time of his death, he was completing the manuscript for *Shrubs of the Southeastern*



FIG. 2. Wilbur Howard Duncan, circa 1983, on a trip collecting for his field guides.



Fig. 3. Wilbur Duncan's first specimen (Duncan 1; *Trillium sessile* L., Cedar Cliffs, Indiana; 18 April 1932; GA). Wilbur collected over 30,000 sets of vascular plant exsiccatae in his lifetime.

*United States*, a significant guide including 700 of his color photographs (Sheurer 1999).

Wilbur belonged to 18 professional societies and associations. He was a charter member of the Association of Southeast Biologists and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He held several offices with the Botanical Society of America and was President of the Georgia Academy of Science for two terms. He was also active in the American Society of Plant Taxonomists, serving four years as a member of the council; the American Institute of Biological Sciences; the International Association of Plant Taxonomists; and the Georgia Botanical Society. He was awarded the 1990 *Elizabeth Ann Bartholomew Service Award* by the Southern Appalachian Botanical Club (Martin 1990). In 1998, the Department of Plant Biology, University of Georgia, initiated the *Wilbur*

*Duncan Award for Outstanding Graduate Student* in his honor to recognize outstanding graduate student contributions to research, teaching, and service to the department. The single yearly recipient, who demonstrates excellence in these three areas, is awarded \$1,000 and an inscribed plaque.

In his retirement Wilbur continued to be a botanical resource for the GA Herbarium and to the many students sharing space with him, especially those involved in floristic studies for their degrees. When students had difficulties identifying a plant, they would finally consult Wilbur—who would absentmindedly rattle off a plant name that inevitably was correct, much to the amazement of the students. Indeed, many were the students sent back to their desks muttering as to why they hadn't thought of the answer themselves!

The faculty and staff of our department were impressed to observe Wilbur here at work five days a week (and often also on the weekends), sitting upright at his microscope in "his corner" or editing portions of his latest book manuscript(s). When most older faculty were looking forward to retirement as a time of rest and passage to other areas of interest, Wilbur had already begun his second botanical career resulting in his well-written popular field guides, beautifully illustrated with his own photographs. His books brought botany to more people at an understandable level than any academic text. These guides are coauthored by his wife of 64 years, Marion Duncan, also a professional botanist. The Duncans logged over 80,000 miles together compiling these field books (McCarthy 1999).

Always busy in the herbarium and nattily dressed in coat and bowtie, Wilbur was an enviable model of a true botanist devoted to his craft. He was efficient, focused, and direct with an acute attention to detail, coupled with a notoriously understated sense of humor. He practiced the art of seeing beauty in everything and readily shared this vision with others. As age and health issues encroached on his schedule, he willed himself to continue until his shrub book was completed, a testament to his strength of character. And the latter, he admitted, was due to the unequivocal support of his loving wife, Marion, who was his best friend, field partner and confidant. Wilbur refused to autograph copies of their field guides unless Marion also provided her signature as coauthor and partner. He was unstinting in his praise and respect for Marion as the steady fulcrum of his life and also never failed to proudly discuss his children and grandchildren. It is often said of certain people that we shall not see their like again, and while perhaps a cliché in today's world, the statement holds a high timbre for the life of Wilbur H. Duncan.

Wilbur Duncan is survived by his wife Marion Duncan; three children (Douglas, Lucia, and Mack Duncan); and four grandchildren (Amber, Laramie, Laura, and Ross Duncan). To honor him, the family has requested donations to the *Wilbur and Marion Duncan Publishing Fund*, a charitable trust established with the University of Georgia Foundation to ensure the publication of the

Duncans' last manuscript, *Shrubs of the Southeastern United States*. Those wishing to participate may send tax-deductible contributions to: The University of Georgia Foundation, *Wilbur and Marion Duncan Publishing Fund*, 394 S. Milledge Avenue, Suite 100, Athens, GA 30602-5582.

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